Transcript of Interview with Dr. Azizah Y. al-Hibri

Introduction

Elkoustaft: My name is Hisham Elkoustaft and I am a third-year student at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Today is Saturday, March 21st, 2002. It is 12:20 pm in the afternoon and I will be interviewing Dr. Azizah Y. al-Hibri.

The interview commences on the next page.
In Beirut, Lebanon.

What is Beirut, Lebanon?

We're at a point of closing together, changing... I think of those days in a very warm way. We spent a lot of time together and we would make a lot of fun. I would read and then when I did have siblings in school, I taught myself how to read. I don't know how I did it, but I was so into childhood books mostly being alone reading a lot of books and magazines.

There are quite a number of years between me and my siblings, so my

Your relationship with your siblings, did you guys get along very well?

El-Koushite: If you could just quickly tell us what your childhood was like in terms of

Sister Huda is a doctor. My brother Thani is an international business person; my brother Jamal is a chemical engineer; my brother Taysib is a professor of history; and my

and what do they do?

I have three brothers and a sister.

How many?

Yes I do.

Do you have any siblings?

I do mostly and mantenerance.

What kind of business is he involved in?

Father was a business man and still is.

My mother was a good house wife, and mother, and caretaker, and my

What did your parents do for a living?

Damascus, Syria.

My father was born in Beirut as well, and my mother was born in

Where were your parents born?

I was born in 1943 in Beirut, Lebanon.

Where were you born and when?
Now I want to go to a university and my brother backed me up, and so I want to go to a university. I had to convince my father, not my family, but just my father. I really excel in Arabic literature, and my father's argument was that I was really excellent in Arabic literature, I was already published, and we had at home one of the best Arabic libraries in the country, so he couldn't see what I would gain from going to a university.

If I were to continue my education now and focus on a bit more on your questions, how is the American University in Beirut, Lebanon, as opposed to attending college in the United States?

Your question about why did you decide to stay in Beirut, Lebanon, or go to an American University in Beirut, "Al-Hibni:"

El-Kousiat: I am going to continue my questions now and focus on a bit more on your influence on me.

Khalil Jibran: and were there any high school teachers also that stuck out in your mind as having a positive influence on you?

El-Kousiat: I wish mostly literature, Arabic literature, and English literature, and

El-Kousiat: and what were your favorite subjects or extra curricular activities that you engaged in?

El-Kousiat: I was an honors student. I could say, I went to the American school for honors, and what type of student were you in high school?

Yes I did.

El-Kousiat: and did you attend high school also in Beirut?
It's counterpart in the United States is

very kind and sensitive person.

I did not know about Malcolm X until he arrived on campus. We had

a great leader such as Malcolm X back then,

and how was your experience in being in the same environment with such

Malcolm X and Malcolm X? I don't know if people remember

can I remember what position I held in his, I remember at one point

I was it, well not political, but I was a member of the debating society. I

and in terms of any political activity at all.

did a lot of things. I remember one program which was very successful

and what did you do most?

quite a bit...quite a bit.

with student government?

in terms of extra-curricular activities, were you involved? For instance

was in student government?

I did not know them at all, but I was very well with me, but I liked the

no, for some reason I just loved it. It was different. I loved physics, I

literature and now all of a sudden I'm focusing on physics?

was that a tough transition having all the years previously focused on

I have a physics lab at home (laughing), so he sent me to college.

it was actually physics...yes because I argued to my father that we didn't

and while at A&L, what was your undergraduate major?
I guess this is a good time to make the transition from your studies in Beirut to the United States. You attended graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. When did you first become interested in graduate studies?

Elkouafi: The experience in Beirut was really transformative for me. I was exposed to different cultures and ways of thinking, which I think contributed to my decision to pursue graduate studies. The nature of the campus, the way the courses were structured, everything, really influenced my decision. It wasn't until my second year in grad school that I decided to focus on my research.

al-Hibri: Yes, I think the decision to go to grad school was a natural progression. I wanted to continue learning and deepening my understanding of the field.

Elkouafi: And you eventually chose to attend the University of Pennsylvania, where you obtained a PhD in Philosophy. What led you to choose Penn as opposed to any other institutions in the US?

al-Hibri: A combination of factors. First, the reputation of the university and its faculty. Second, the financial aid package I received was very attractive. And finally, the opportunity to work with specific professors who had similar research interests.

Elkouafi: And if you could recall your experience at Penn, was there any negative treatment that you faced because of your gender, ethnic or religious background?

al-Hibri: I have to say that my experience at Penn was very positive. I think the university was very welcoming and supportive of its students. I didn't face any discrimination or negative treatment.

Elkouafi: I think of the days doing philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, in a very positive light. It was very difficult when the Munich events had taken place, you know there was that in that room, but the department, did not identify, politically or ethnically, it seemed to me. We were just a family, depending on our thought, and there were different schools of thought in the department, and I found it comfortable group and had a great time.
Elkoufai: and you speak of Penn promoting this notion of family. I was just wondering about the diversity of this family and whether there were other female PhD students as well?

Elkoufai: yes. And even the faculty in philosophy was quite diverse, not only in terms of gender but also ethnicity.

al-Hibri: During your course of graduate studies did you teach any courses as a teaching assistant?

Elkoufai: yes I did. The first time was actually in a...I think I was given a research assistantship and I did not teach because in the first years that is wrong...I'm sorry let me back up a little bit...I'm having difficulty remembering because it's been such a long time. No I don't believe I taught but I did have research assistantships all the way through.

Elkoufai: what was that experience like?

al-Hibri: it was wonderful. Being you see, once I became a graduate student, I enjoyed higher education a lot more than I did in undergraduate. In undergraduate, I felt I had no control over my life or what I was being fed and that I could not really interact with it very positively. In graduate school, I felt I was given space to think and to take control over my own intellectual life and so I had a great time.

Elkoufai: and what was that transition to teaching?

al-Hibri: I will now go ahead and quickly shift to your teaching experience after obtaining your Ph.D. After completion of your Ph.D., you became an assistant professor at Texas A&M?

Elkoufai: yes.

al-Hibri: why did you choose to go to Texas?

Elkoufai: well you know these days it was very hard to get a job in philosophy, in fact when you apply to get a PhD in philosophy you get a slip with the acceptance telling you we warn you there are no jobs out there. And I was very fortunate that when I applied I did get an offer and I got it from Texas A&M and it's a great university.

Elkoufai: could you just tell us briefly what courses you taught?
al-Hibri: Yes, I was hired to teach a variety of courses. Ethics, logic, and a new course that I designed with another person who co-taught it with me and that's technology and human affairs. We ended up actually writing a book for the course, which got published and met with some success. Later in my stay at Texas A&M, I was also asked to teach feminism, and I did teach those courses. I think my teaching style might be changing just a little bit as I grow up and get older. But it has never been authoritarian or hierarchical, at least not in any way that I am aware of. I like to get a lot of questions and answers in class and sometimes outside class, for example in the feminist class I took them on a trip to a museum showing feminist exhibits, so you know we did a lot of things.

Elkoussf: And how would you characterize your teaching style?

al-Hibri: I hope this question isn't too redundant, but what is your favorite aspect of being a professor?

Elkoussf: The fact that I have (pause)...you could say this is not true but the academics who go into teaching do not see themselves as employees, they are free thinkers and they have no bosses and they do what they think is important and is right and it's that complete attachment to freedom that allows me to produce and I am not sure if I am capable of doing that all the time, I don't think I can come up with any useful ideas.

Elkoussf: Again this is a perfect time to move on to the next section of questioning, having enjoyed your teaching experience so much, and enjoying interacting with students, learning from them and teaching them, you actually decided to once again leave academia and go back to law...
Response or were overly ambitious?

Frustration because you did not think the professors gave you a proper

Finding problems with it. I was feeling very frustrated

unconsciously thinking, every single assignment, a professor made and
the work I was supposed to do. As a student and then since I was a logician, I was supposed to

back to law school. I found out, I was after being an academic process to

thinking, how does the law work. But the most difficult aspect of going

for the American experience in terms of the material, the mode of

my family back home put law in the law is different and I was not prepared

really did not prepare myself to figure out what law is. I had lawyers in

Yes it was partly difficult because although I decided to go into law, I

traditional difficult year everyone goes through.

speaking of your first year of law school, how did you find it? Was it the

continue the formal evidence thing. I was doing my first year in law school.

Penn a deal whereby I could have office and assistants, and so on, to

negotiated with the philosophy department and the women's studies at

concentrate on courses in philosophy and I had

had friends, and I had been established the first feminism magazine in the

I could keep my connections with the philosophy department where I still

I could keep my connection with the department and a law school was because

than one reason I found Penn very interesting as a law school was because

issues of diversity and feminism in that regard, I have to mention to you

the school. The student body was diverse. I felt the school held on

Graduate school, how would you describe it?

and just in terms of the student body and diversity at the law school, post

positive. I knew he area. I knew the place, so why not thought

I wanted to go back to Penn. My experience the first time around was so

again just out of curiosity, which law schools did you consider?

were very consistent with each other

to go but that one tool for change would be law and law and philosophy

the need to be clear in my mind about which way and which way

through philosophy there’s really interested in change. It’s not really going to happen

women’s rights and specifically feminism. Women’s rights is one to me

when I was starting to write more and more on feminist issues such as

attending law school?

When did you first become interested in or seriously considered

school.
spill me for the summer. And of course he’s a year 1 study for the bar.

Interviewing also with Pickle and they both liked me so they decided to

judge Pickle. I was interviewing for the position and something I ended up

not between a hersite and

the first summer, I spill it, when I was 1 between a hersite and

just briefly tell us what you did your last two summers? can you

you mentioned Davis where the one of your summer employed, can you

well those days...has good quarters (laughing).

well block when I visited. I found out that the journals were done very

with the money still sitting there having done anything with it, but on the

for the journal. Unfortunately, the decision process took forever and I left,

we had dean Mundelman, I think to negotiate with him a better headquarter.

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for the journal so that we can finish it properly, and so on...at this time

amount of money from Davis where I was a summer associate. just

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Elkousaf: I guess again this is a perfect transition period. As you mentioned, immediately after law school you joined the Harvard Divinity School Center for the Study of World Religions. Can you just tell us what sparked your interest in religious studies?

Elkousaf: and how long were you there?

Elkousaf: one semester. I could have stayed for a year but I thought that would delay me too much in terms of my class as Sullivan and Cromwell.

Elkousaf: oh, so subsequent to that you joined the law firm Sullivan and Cromwell.

Elkousaf: First thing, when I entered there were a lot of books that we were asked to read in preparation. You know you don't get... at least when I went there and I understood that the was the experience of others, they don't take you there and tell you to do this or that... they prepare you... and part of the preparation is reading a lot of works so that you get to know the culture of the firm to some extent and then will be orientation to some programs and seminars. So we did this for a couple of weeks and then I started getting the tasks. I really enjoyed very much the tasks that I had.

Elkousaf: when we were working on adjustment of eighty seven when we were working sometimes I remember getting to be too much and I decided to look for something less demanding and I was told that at Deboeuf you can have more normal hours and so I went there but it turned out that you still had to work long hours (laughter)

al-Hibri: speaking of Deboeuf, you were there for five years after Sullivan and Cromwell so it must have been something else aside from just less hours.
well you know...you know the market (laughing) when you go out and

so what attracted you most then to the University of Richmond, Law

as my stepping stone...and finally stumbled into the editorial. It's not published yet, and I need that

to seriously research the article and very hard, it took me many months.

said sure, I thought there would be a good transition and I feel very

Professor, I got a call from Case Western Reserve University of International

easy to shift to academia. And I didn't want to go back to philosophy

was sitting in my Depression office, pondering how to make the shift to

not at all...in fact the transition was very good. Whatever happened was...as I

property practice?

in 1992 as you mentioned, you decided that I guess, you missed the word

days and I am sure much of this has been learned since then

go to your different projects as one of the reasons I believe are the early

because a woman is not some woman, but that woman, etc. When were you

some of the issues...because women are a lot like women. There were women

when your child tells you I want an aggressive term so don't put woman

I really like your response. And the part is very interesting. I think that

there were problems...I will not specify which topics. But there were

and if you could just briefly tell us about your experiences as a woman in

unhappy because again, I see there until I feel that it was time.

because a professor was really when I was looking for a professor, and

looking for and that when I really need to do is become a professor and

shifts from this really where women are much still in the hands of things I was

Depositions because it becomes clear to me after a while, while you know I just

Sullivan and Cramwell so quickly that have stayed for a while. I stayed at

had realized at the time and in Depositions I think I should not have let

especially in the area of sexuality was a lot more suitable for me than I

no frankly in Depositions I think the culture at Sullivan and Cramwell

Do you think that the firm culture at Depositions was more conducive to

Your other interests as opposed to Sullivan?
Which would you say is your favorite to teach and why?

"Nearness, not distance, is the critical factor in teaching. A student who is near you, who is physically close, is more likely to pay attention and participate. I like to get to know my students as individuals and involve them in discussions of current events. I believe in providing a broad base of knowledge that goes beyond the specific subject matter. I encourage students to think critically and develop their own ideas."

"I teach philosophy, and I find it fascinating to explore the fundamental questions about life, knowledge, and morality. I believe that philosophical inquiry is essential for developing a well-rounded perspective on the world."

"I teach law, and I find it challenging to balance the need for technical knowledge with the importance of ethical considerations. I think it's important for lawyers to have a strong sense of justice and to be able to advocate for their clients in a principled way."

"I teach economics, and I find it rewarding to help students understand how economic principles can be applied to real-world situations. I try to make the material relevant and engaging by connecting it to current events and personal experiences."

"I teach history, and I find it fascinating to explore the ways in which past events have shaped the present. I try to help students see the connections between the past and the present and to think critically about the implications of historical events."
I just sort of want to bring the interview to a close to give you a break and I was looking at my time. I think it is 10:08 AM, so I hope you're not worried about that.

Elkonig: Not at all. I'm happy to continue for a bit longer if that's okay.

Elkonig: I'm very grateful for your time today. I've really enjoyed our conversation. If you have any further thoughts or insights that you'd like to share, I'd be happy to hear them.
These people:

various countries with has been the lesson that you've drawn from

experience. I guess in your instruction with non-students when you visit

countries, you mentioned that from your students you've learned the value of

Islam.

When we approve of a project, it's just telling them, you know, what

white also to try and let them know that this lecture is not about getting

realizing that this is the same lecture I gave to Muslims. So it takes me a

fashioning the situation and make them think positively about it, not

speaking in the LRT. Speak about Islam, the audience tends to think that

depends on the audience. I've had a couple of reactions. When I talk

to an American audience with some... and they look at me with some...

and I am trying to persuade them about what I am trying to pass on to the

audience with whom I am persuading an American audience.

Islamic and many countries including: Qatar, Pakistan, Kuwait,

isn't characterized you as a social activist; you have spoken in many

now you can apply both as a law professor and... I don't know if I can

that word.

religion or the other, and Khamran means diversity, that's why we choose

childhood of Khamran. It's all human beings. Not just people with one

belief. And human beings that God has given diversity to the

world which means Khamran in one of the rooms. I said Khamran

Khamran actually we picked the word because there is a verse in the

now again aside from Khamran... could you just briefly tell us where the

voice some of their concern.

Khamran, Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights. Yes, I think a few

years ago, it because clear that while Muslim women's issues are of

Khamran, Muslim Women. This is a non-Profit Islamic Organizations.

Yes, At the moment I am actually the president and executive director of
necessary a break in the interview... women's rights. I just want to ask... (Dr. Al-Hibri)’s concerns sympotoms

Ekoquist: the best way to describe you from my personal perspective is that you

and solutions

right now? I mean, you have been in office for so long... or you have been in a short term. Do I look for quick fixes and don’t look at other

mentioning that... I would say when you think of other’s... but since you’ve

well I’m glad you spoke with law students because my advice would

Elkoquist: I guess I’ll end the interview with two very quick questions. What advice you would

Elkoquist: I think this goal

and giving it a crucial summation to analysts do you think we are close to

Elkoquist: I think it was in 1997 that you visited Indonesia, if I am not mistaken. In

other things.

Elkoquist: if you want to succeed in public diplomacy, in teaching in a variety of

patience again and don’t rush to judgment. Patience is a very good quality
Thank you so much.

You're so much for your time and I was a wonderful time speaking with you. I just want to say on behalf of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, I hope I have time to do.

Elkousse: Of my lifetime into the area of Irishism or mysticism and that's the one.

Yes (laughing). Funny you should ask. Yes, I see myself towards the end.

Feeling that there is still something that you need to do or accomplish?

Elkousse: Feel that I have to use the word specialists, but specialists in Islam